

EXTENDING RECOVERY INTO THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Ministry

by

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## Abstract

### Extending Recovery into the Life of the Church

by

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Twelve Step programs of recovery from dependencies of various kinds have been carried out alongside the life of the Church for the past fifty years. Churches have housed Twelve Step meetings. Pastors have counseled people recovering from alcoholism and other dependency problems. A relationship with Twelve Step programs has not often developed beyond this institutional and professional relationship.

A Twelve Step program of recovery encourages an encounter with the spiritual dimensions of life. The program uses spiritual language and religious symbols to describe the recovery experience. It provides forms of re-education, in thinking and living, which are borrowed from religious tradition. Christian congregations have an inherent interest in such aspects of spiritual life. However, there has been little attempt by congregations to help people to explore these dimensions of recovery within the context of the church community itself. With such help, some recovering people might find an additional center of support and guidance for whole-life renewal.

There are a variety of entry points for and hindrances to participation of recovering people in the church. Entry points include the meeting sites and counselors which the church provides, fellow Twelve Step members who are already participating in the church, devotional resources which are compatible with each of the Twelve Steps, and stories of spiritual renewal in the biblical tradition and the history of the Church. Hindrances to participation in the church include the encounter of recovering people with the absolute nature of some traditional church doctrines and the atmosphere of denial of dependency problems in some faith communities.

Christian education can be an aide to the integration of recovering people into the life of the church. Educational experiences and settings allow people to explore new dimensions of the spiritual life before fully committing to particular forms of expressing these dimensions. Some approaches to Christian education can effectively assist persons to work through the resistances and obstacles to religious life.

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## CHAPTER 1

## The Program and the Church

Among the many contemporary therapeutic approaches to dependency problems, the Twelve Step program is prominent. It is prominent because of the growing numbers of participants involved. There are numerous recovery programs today which are based on the original Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous and most are growing in their number of participants. It is also prominent because of its effectiveness. A wide diversity of people today claim to be practicing the Twelve Steps to the benefit of their psychological and physical health. Family, friendships and work relationships often seem to improve with the following of a Twelve Step path through life. It is probably the least expensive and most effective approach to deal with chemical dependency. In addition, it is endorsed by the medical, social welfare and religious communities.

The Twelve Steps offer a program of recovery which is spiritual. It seeks to replace people's chemical or relationship dependency with a dependency upon a "power greater than themselves."<sup>1</sup> The spirituality of the program has aided millions of people in the renewal of their mind, body, emotions, and relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous, 3rd ed. (New York: AA World Services, 1976), 59. (Hereafter cited as AA.)



Over the past fifty-five years the church and the Program have existed side-by-side in our society. Twelve Step groups often meet in church facilities. Many participants have benefitted from clergy and pastoral counselors. It may be observed in a rapidly expanding body of literature on the Program and the Christian faith, that the two traditions have common interests and structures. Indeed, it has been asserted since the beginning of the Twelve Step Program that recovery and participation in the life of the church can be integrated. However, as Taylor points out, "AA and classical Christianity...are like parallel highways, headed in the same direction, covering the same general ground, but consistently maintaining their distance."<sup>2</sup> These two compatible institutions seldom have been integrated.

The church and Twelve Step program have, in fact, had little interest in directly interacting with each other or integrating the lifestyles and spiritualities they suggest. To be sure, a number of hindrances to this integration have been recognized. While the literature has reported these hindrances, little attention appears to have been given to how they might be overcome.

Many descriptions have been made over the past 60 years as to how a Twelve Step program incorporates religious life

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<sup>2</sup> G. Aiken Taylor, A Sober Faith (New York: Macmillan 1953), 106.

and spirituality life into the recovering person's life. The "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous describes how many alcoholics conclude that "in order to recover they must acquire...a God consciousness followed at once by a vast change in feeling and outlook."<sup>3</sup> Extensive work on this aspect of recovery was done in Ernest Kurtz's history of Alcoholics Anonymous. He notes how early observers, including John D. Rockefeller, detected a "primitive Christianity" in the program.<sup>4</sup> Howard Clinebell convincingly described the Twelve Step program of AA as a "religious approach" to an addiction problem.<sup>5</sup> G. Aiken Taylor described the religion of AA as "a sober Christian faith."<sup>6</sup> The psychological, theological, and social dynamics of the program were reviewed by Robert Albers, who acknowledged its spiritual fellowship, albeit with some limitations.<sup>7</sup> Finally, in analyzing an Adult Children of Alcoholics Twelve Step Program, or ACoA, Lynne Bundesen

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<sup>3</sup> AA, 569.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Kurtz, Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous (Center City, Minn.: Hazelden Educational Services, 1979), 176.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Clinebell, Some Religious Approaches to the Problem of Alcoholism, Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 1954 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> Taylor.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Albers, The Theological and Psychological Dynamics of Transformation in Recovery from the Disease of Alcoholism, Ph.D. Diss., School of Theology at Claremont, 1982 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1982), 247.

pointed out some of the concerns about spiritual matters held by its members. "Many people whose focus was the management of addiction and co-dependency were struggling with the Third Step of the Twelve Steps---understanding God."<sup>8</sup>

Recognizing the spiritual aspect of the Program, a number of Christian ministers in the counseling field have made suggestions about how an integration of Twelve Step Program and religious life might be achieved. Vernon Bittner has cast the Twelve Steps in specifically Christian language. For example, he rephrases "We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs" to "We admitted to Christ...the exact nature of our sins" in Step 5.<sup>9</sup> Michael Wyatt has sought to discover the religious beliefs which Christians will benefit from as they practice a recovery program.<sup>10</sup> Recently, Dennis Morreim has elaborated on the tenets of biblical theology which are held in common between the Program and the

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<sup>8</sup> Lynne Bundesen, GodDependency: Finding Freedom from Co-dependency and Discovering Spiritual Self-Reliance (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Vernon Bittner, You Can Help With Your Healing (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 144.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Wyatt, "What Must I Believe to Recover? The Spirituality of the Twelve Step Programs", Quarterly Review [United Methodist] 9 (Winter 1989): 28-47.

church.<sup>11</sup> The role of pastoral care in helping churches care for recovering alcoholics and their families was specifically considered by Albers.<sup>12</sup>

Efforts toward integration of the Program and the church are being made not only in theory, but also in practice. Bob and Pauline Bartosch have developed a program guide for applying Bible passages to each of the steps in weekly meetings held in the local church. This program, called "Overcomers Outreach," is described as "building bridges between AA and church" and "a way back to the church of their choice."<sup>13</sup> Another attempt at this integration takes a slightly more cognitive approach. It lies within the Serendipity Support Group Series edited by Lyman Coleman and Marty Scales and is designed to help candidates for recovery to "understand the spiritual foundation of Twelve Step Programs."<sup>14</sup>

With the possible exception of Bundesen's work, few of these theoretical or practical attempts at integration have dealt seriously with the realities of life in the church

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<sup>11</sup> Dennis Morreim, The Road to Recovery: Bridges Between the Bible and the Twelve Steps (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Albers.

<sup>13</sup> Bob Bartosch and Pauline Bartosch, FREED (LaHabra, Calif.: Overcomers Outreach, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> Richard Peace, 12 Steps: The Path to Wholeness (Littleton, Colo: Serendipity House, 1990).

which can hinder integration of recovery program and church life. These realities have been recognized by recovering people since the formation of AA. None of these works seriously acknowledge that an intentional and mutual integration of Program-life and church-life has been difficult for people to achieve. Few attempts have been able to respect, fully, the basic integrity of the Program and the ongoing integrity of the local congregation, at the same time. Specific attention has not been given to what educational structures and methods might provide bridges between the life of the Program and the life of the church.

It is observed in this writing project that Twelve Step members sometimes ask the question "Is the church a place for me?" at some point in their recovery. They can be helped to answer this question through educational experiences and various teaching approaches. Through educational experiences recovering people can be integrated into some key dimensions of the life of the church. Through these experiences they can come to feel grounded in the church as well as their program. Various teaching approaches can then be used to help people reflect on what it means for them to participate in both institutions. In following an educational approach the integrity of each entity, Program and church, can be respected and intercourse between the two can be encouraged to the overall benefit of

the individual. Obstacles to this intercourse can be acknowledged and retained or resolved.

The emphasis on an educational approach to helping people extend recovery into the life of the church takes place with awareness of other integrative points in the life of the church for them. Worship may be the best point of contact with the church for some recovering persons. Worship offers the form and content of the Christian tradition; something needed for the recovering person to become grounded in the church. However, worship services seldom stop to attend to the teachable moments in individual growth. Individual counseling may perform an integrative function for other recovering persons. Through counseling attention can be given to the unique spiritual journey of each recovering person. However, pastoral counseling tends to follow a psychotherapeutic model which hesitates to directly and intentionally introduce religious form and content into the life of the counselee. Evangelistic efforts have been a third contact point with the church, though these have been less successful points of integration. Recovering people have tended to resist a rapid conversion to participation in the life of the church, traditionally promoted in evangelism. Christian education, by contrast with the above integration points, has the ability to intentionally introduce Christian religious forms and content to the recovering person at their level of

interest and receptivity. It can do so in a relatively relaxed atmosphere of mutual exploration with leader and fellow learners.

Christian education has a unique opportunity to continue a process started in Twelve Step work. In the earliest literature of AA, recovery was respected as an educational experience itself: "Most of our experiences [of transformation] are what the psychologist William James calls the 'educational variety,' because they develop slowly over a period of time."<sup>15</sup> The AA literature is saying, at this point, that a slow and guided transformation is the normal way of recovery; gradual change with increasing awareness of the freedom and responsibility that comes through spiritual growth. For this reason, experiences of an educational variety should be prominent among the experiences of intercourse with religious community for recovering people. Through Christian education, recovering people can also be helped to identify those other ministries of the church which can expand, deepen, and continue the process which began for them in the Twelve Steps.

#### Terms Defined

Anyone offering guidance to recovering people and opportunities for them to explore the life of the church, needs to understand the nature of dependency and recovery.

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<sup>15</sup> AA, 569.

The word dependency describes the life problem which a person is attempting to overcome in a Twelve Step program. The word addiction may be substituted for dependence at times, especially when the problem dependency is upon a consumable substance. Dependence is used in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in two ways.<sup>16</sup>

It describes a disorder in which a person manifests a cluster of cognitive, behavioral, and psychological symptoms that indicate that a person has impaired control of psychoactive substance use and continues use of the substance despite adverse consequences. The symptoms of the dependence syndrome include, but are not limited to, symptoms of tolerance and withdrawal.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, it describes a personality disorder whose essential feature...is a pervasive pattern of dependent and submissive behavior beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts ....excessive dependence on others leads to difficulty in initiating projects or doing things on one's own. People with this disorder tend to feel uncomfortable or helpless when alone and will go to great lengths to avoid being alone. They are devastated when close relationships end and tend to be preoccupied with fears of being abandoned....tend to subordinate themselves to others, agreeing with people even when they believe them to be wrong, for fear of being rejected. They will volunteer to do things that are unpleasant or demeaning in order to get others to like them.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-III, 3rd ed. revised (Washington, D.C.: publisher, 1987), hereafter cited as DSM-III.

<sup>17</sup> DSM-III, 166.

<sup>18</sup> DSM-III, 353.



The psychology of dependence is largely the same, whether the object of dependence is a chemical substance, another person, a particular life role or a social process such as congregational life. The dependent personality wants independence from others but needs the security of being in the care of others. Because of paradoxical feelings, neither independence nor dependence is achieved, leaving a basic anxiety and conflict. The dependent person chooses a substance, a relationship, isolation, etc., as curative agent for the anxiety. The dependent person "feels increasingly powerless and bad about themselves...the notion that they can take responsibility for themselves is inconceivable."<sup>19</sup>

Dependency is a phenomenon which can be noticed in organizations as well as individual personalities. Evans and Reed define it as the "unconscious assumption that the group's survival depends on being sustained and protected by an all-powerful, all-knowing leader (who may be a person, present or absent, an institution or an idea)".<sup>20</sup> When an organization subordinates its purposes to be part of a larger whole, it can be said to be relatively dependent.

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<sup>19</sup> Ann Wilson Schaef, When Society Becomes an Addict (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 18.

<sup>20</sup> H. Barry Evans and Bruce Reed, "The Success and Failure of a Religious Club," Building Effective Ministry, ed. Carl Dudley (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 40-41.

A phenomenon related to dependency is co-dependency. The term covers a range of relationship dependencies present for anyone who has had prolonged exposure to another dependant, usually within their family or some other primary social group. According to Bundesen, "co-dependent" describes a person or a state of mind comfortable with artifice and delusion, denial and the repression of individuality.<sup>21</sup> These character defects have usually developed as coping skills while being part of a dysfunctional living system, but are carried on and compulsively practiced even when out of the system. Symptoms include regular experiences of intense shame, extreme self-consciousness, and fear of abandonment. Co-dependents may resort to "control patterns" or "compliance patterns" of behavior (or both), in order to secure the very relationships which are uncomfortable for them.<sup>22</sup>

Recovery is a process observed in the lives of people and their families who are breaking free from the controlling power of a dependency. It is progress toward abstinence or psychological detachment from the substance, relationship, or process that they used to avoid feeling anxiety and conflict. Recovery is a wholistic process in which physical, mental, and spiritual health, self-respect,

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<sup>21</sup> Bundesen, 20.

<sup>22</sup> What is Co-Dependency? (Phoenix: Co-Dependents Anonymous, 1988).

and relationships are restored together. A sense of personal empowerment accompanies the process. This contrasts with the illness and hopelessness which precedes recovery for the dependent person.

Recovery is a psychological process which begins when the denial of a dependency problem is broken through. The personality which has been centered around a debilitating substance, relationship, or process gets re-centered around something which can empower healthy changes in attitude and lifestyle. Recovery is a "restoration of ego strength to enable the victim of dependence to once again cope with life situations."<sup>23</sup>

Recovery engages all of a person's capacities. In it, the distorted thinking that grows from attempts to control the processes and fortunes of life is corrected. Reconciliation of past relationships is possible as relationships with family, friends, and associates are attended to, nurtured, and healed. At its heart, the recovery process is spiritual in nature, as psychological barriers to God are swept away and persons live in an often conscious relationship with a Power greater than themselves. According to Albers, recovery is a transformation "initiated by God or a Higher Power which results in a radical reversal of self-perception and lifestyle."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Albers, 77.

In contemporary society it is important to understand what someone means when they say that they are in a Twelve Step Program. In earlier decades AA and Twelve Step Programs were nearly synonymous. This is no longer the case. There are more than fourteen Twelve Step Programs, including Narcotics Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics, and Co-Dependents Anonymous. These programs differ little from the language and practice of Alcoholics Anonymous, with the exception that they substitute various dependencies in place of "alcohol" in Step 1.<sup>25</sup> All of these programs follow the paradigm of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions which will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.<sup>26</sup> The typical agenda of Twelve Step meetings include testimony by members which is characterized by confession and encouragement, discussions of the meanings of

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<sup>24</sup> Albers, 5.

<sup>25</sup> AA, 59. "Admitted that we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable."

<sup>26</sup> Patricia A. O'Gorman and Philip Oliver-Diaz, 12 Steps to Self-Parenting (Deerfield Beach, Fla: Health Communications, 1988). There are other programs of spiritually based recovery through twelve steps, which substantially alter the language of the original Twelve Steps, eg. "twelve steps to self parenting." Such programs are considered as attempts to integrate the Twelve Step program with psychotherapy, behavior modification, or religion. The terms Twelve Step program and the Program will be reserved for those programs which use the Twelve Steps of AA or have gained permission from AA to identify a problem other than alcohol in the language of Steps 1 and 12. For example the group called Emotional Health Anonymous has substituted the word "emotions" for alcohol in the first Step, but would still be considered a Twelve Step program.

the Twelve Steps and Traditions for living during established meetings, and prayer.

One problem in describing a Twelve Step program is that of distinguishing between a treatment program and the individual who is working the program. The question is whether the Program has an existence of its own, apart from individuals who are working the program. In the understanding of this writer there is not a Program apart from the working of it by persons even though components of the Program can be identified apart from the individuals who are employing them toward recovery.

Twelve Step members may often be heard to describe their recovery program as a "spiritual program." Those who invite or guide members' inquiry about the church will benefit from understanding the difference between a "spiritual" program and "religion" in the philosophy of the Twelve Step program. Recovery is spiritual in the sense of "being possessed of a new sense of power and direction" after one admits that they are not able to manage their dependency problem.<sup>27</sup> For many recovering people, the Twelve Step group itself is the first expression of power and direction, but there is a spirit which transcends the group process. According to Taylor, "The social element may get a man sober but in the last analysis only God can keep

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<sup>27</sup> AA, 54.

him sober."<sup>28</sup> To the originators of the Twelve Steps, abstinence from alcohol was the immediate and lasting goal of the Program, but a lifetime of spiritual growth was the reward as well. The personality of the one who is growing spiritually through the Program is characterized by a willingness to be transformed by honesty and open-mindedness. These qualities which run counter to the rigidity, judgmentalism and denial of life before the Program are evidence of "an almost childish faith."<sup>29</sup>

Twelve Step participants make a distinction between this spiritual program and religion. Religion is typically thought of as the external forms of a particular faith tradition. Religion is the combination of rituals, symbols, and stories adhered to by that tradition, denomination or congregation. Spirituality involves the living engagement with a power and presence mediated through the many forms of religion, a power greater than the self or the group.

Religion can have a positive or negative meaning for the recovering person depending on their past experience. However, religion is to be distinguished from religiosity if it is to have a positive connotation. Religiosity may be thought of as religion divorced from honesty about one's life problems, openmindedness to the spiritual journeys of

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<sup>28</sup> Taylor, 4.

<sup>29</sup> AA, 54.

others and willingness to change in personal feelings and outlook. In this case, religion is reduced to a set of doctrines, rituals, and values which are not subject to an ongoing transformation. Exclusive adherence to a particular idea of God can be both a symptom and a root of religiosity. Those who have given in to religiosity accept a sense of goodness which is imputed to them as a reward for conforming to a religious system. Religiosity is not just a benign mutation of true religion. It can be aggressive and even coercive toward people whose spiritual experience is not compatible with that promoted by the religious system.

The sensitivity about religion in the Program means that an understanding of the church must be defined with some care by ministers when representing and recommending its life to inquirers who are in recovery. The local church or congregation is a particular Christian institution with parallels in other religious traditions, e.g. the Jewish synagogue. A church is the local expression of the world-wide and historical Church, sharing in both the strengths and shortcomings of the Church universal, but having its own integrity. A local church has a system of beliefs and practices through which it maintains identity, offers programs, and engages in a set of relationships and processes. It will maintain an identity by discerning between appropriate and inappropriate beliefs and practices for its fellowship and by critiquing the beliefs and

practices of other religious and spiritual organizations. It is a social organization. Evans and Reed call it a "work group" operating with a basic and possibly hidden set of assumptions.<sup>30</sup> It accomplishes a range of functions. The same church can be a prayer chapel for some, a meeting place for others and a symbol of status for yet other members. As with any social organization, its goal is both service to its membership and self-survival. It has potential, as well, to be either dependency-freeing or dependency creating in its social processes.

Finally, with the focus on the educational dimension of the church's life, an understanding of this particular dimension will be useful. An educational approach is one ministry which the church has at its disposal in responding to the needs and interests of recovering people. Parish education will be thought of as an intentional ministry of the local church. It helps people "explore, understand, and enhance the patterns by which they organize their meaning" with the goal of "centering themselves in the world".<sup>31</sup> An educational approach is undertaken with awareness of the difficulties that most people have in integrating inner experiences with outer experiences. One example of this is

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<sup>30</sup> Evans and Reed, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Donald E. Miller and Jack L. Seymour, eds., Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 15.



integration of spiritual recovery with participation in the church. With recovering people, education will be done with particular forms such as study groups, forums, lectures, and individual mentoring. The decision as to which forms to use, who to use them with, and how to use them, can be guided by an overall approach, theory, or model of parish education.<sup>32</sup>

#### The Shape and Direction of this Project

There are several questions which have stimulated and shaped the research of this project. What does the presence of a program of spiritual renewal in one's personal life mean for the future of one's corporate religious life? Why might people who are working Twelve Step Recovery Programs feel a need for or take interest in participation in the life of a church? How might they integrate their Program with the life of the church? What are the obstacles or resistances which will hinder participation in the life of the church? How might educational leaders aid the process of integration? What educational approaches and resources might be drawn together to provide an effective integration process for these people? Responding to these questions has provided the basic plan for researching the problem of a

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<sup>32</sup> Miller and Seymour, 31. In their schema of approaches, "religious instruction," "faith community," "spiritual development," "liberation," and "interpretation" models are described. They are roughly parallel to the models which will be described in Chapter 4.

lack of integration of Twelve Step and church life for some recovering people. The thesis that intentionally developed educational experiences can be bridges for integration is explore as well in responding to these questions.

The methods of research into these questions vary from question to question. Chapter 2 will review stories of recovering individuals, giving a basic feel for the Twelve Step Program. One of the Twelve Steps will be used as a point of entry, as it helps answer the question of why an interest in church participation might develop during the recovery cycle. A review of literature on the Twelve Step Program and its relation to the church will be taken up in Chapter 3 to uncover the hindrances or obstacles to church participation for recovering people. Comments by recovering people about their experience of recovery, as it relates to church participation, will be noted and attended to as well. Chapter 4 will explore how Twelve Step members might be helped to integrate their Program and church life and to extend the recovery process through educational ministry. The example of one church's integrating ministry will be shared. A pedagogical method will be suggested for helping recovering people intentionally reflect upon the integration process. Several approaches to Christian education will be considered as well as an overall model for parish ministry. These will be suggested as both complimenting the suggested pedagogical method and overcoming some of the hindrances to

participation in the church which Twelve Step members may experience.

With the scope of the project outlined above, some parameters of the project can be stated. It is the intention of this project to consider how English-speaking adults in Twelve Step recovery programs can be guided toward a satisfying and empowering interaction with a local churches. While certain limitations of both Twelve Step programs and local congregations will be recognized, the integrity of each is to be highlighted. This rule will also be followed in regard to whether or not the church should replace the Program, or vice versa, in the life of the recovering person.

This study will not explore deeply the origins of dependency problems nor its prevention. While the origins and prevention of addictions need to be understood, an investigation of these things is not rewarding for the explicit purpose of this paper. In fact, most recovering people do not concentrate attention upon them. The exploration of the recovery process will be limited to the lives of individuals and their existing or potential relationship with the church, and will not deal with their past experiences. The family nature of dependency problems and recovery has been well established in research and practical experience, but will not be dealt with directly in this project.

This study will be an exploration of the spiritual dimension of recovery from dependency; a recovery which is guided by a certain history and community described in the Twelve Steps and visited by yearnings and resistances toward organized religious life with its own history and community. Twelve Step recovery will be described not only as a spiritual process but as an educational process as well. This educational process can be supported and extended through Christian education with Twelve Step members in the context of the church. A start will be made toward evaluating the educational approaches with recovering people which may be most helpful to integrating them into the life of the church for extension of their recovery into the religious dimension of life.

## CHAPTER 2

### A Spiritual Program with Religious Possibilities

Twelve Step programs have provided a way of life renewal for millions of people since its birth in Alcoholics Anonymous 50 years ago. From the beginnings of the Program, significant numbers of recovering people have extended their recovery into the life of the church. There are passageways between the parallel pathways of Program and church. Just what is it about the Twelve Steps that opens recovery toward church participation? The most basic and lasting answer to this question is that the Twelve Step program was not designed to be an end in itself. It was to be, for dependent people, a new orientation to the practice of life in its many dimensions; the relationships, roles, and rituals of religion included. On the other hand, there are definite openings toward the church in some of the steps. These will be best identified after gaining, first, a feel for Twelve Step recovery. It will be helpful to explore, briefly, the history and basic components of its formation to understand what sort of life the Program opens up to people. The story of how one chemically dependent person encountered the Program will also be shared to give a more personal feel for it. Then, an appreciation for how religion might expand, deepen and continue recovery for some people will be gained from the personal experiences of

recovering people, before returning to the question of what it is about the Twelve Steps that opens recovery toward the church.

### The Origin of the Twelve Steps

Late in 1938, in a house on Clinton Street in New York City, a former stockbroker named Bill Wilson set out to summarize, in writing, the heart of a program through which he and nearly one hundred other alcoholics in New York and Ohio had achieved sobriety during the previous five years. Bill W., as he came to be known, scrawled the words "How it Works" across the top of a sheet of paper.<sup>1</sup> He proceeded to sum up what he and his friends had learned from their association with a lay confessional movement called the Oxford Group, as they were breaking away from it to form their own group specifically for alcoholics. Bill Wilson outlined a six-step procedure which had been worked out through many trials and errors:

1. We admitted that we were licked, that we were powerless over alcohol.
2. We made an inventory of our defects or sins.
3. We confessed or shared our shortcomings with another person in confidence.
4. We made restitution to all those we had harmed by our drinking.
5. We tried to help other alcoholics, with no thought of reward in money or prestige.
6. We prayed to whatever God we thought there was for power to practice these precepts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kurtz, 69.

<sup>2</sup> Kurtz, 69.

What these steps describe is an ethical, theological and religious discipline that had impressed itself upon them because it helped them stay sober. These precepts were rigorous, interlocked, and consistent with the logic of coming to sobriety. For Wilson and his friends, these steps stood between life and death, or at least sanity and insanity.

These steps grew out of the unique experience of alcoholics within the Oxford Group. This Christian confessional movement had begun in the early 1920s when a Lutheran clergyman named Frank Buchman felt called to employ an evangelistic method which could renew a vital Christian life in people through these points: "surrender, sharing, restitution, quiet time, guidance, witness, fellowship."<sup>3</sup> The group had no official membership and met in private homes or rooms in a church. It was especially popular among upper middle-class Protestants. A number of prominent clergy were involved in Oxford Groups, but the emphasis was on group process and individual discipline, rather than coming under the ministry of some professional clergy.

The attraction of successful men in the community to the fellowship and practice of the Group was one of the means by which the movement grew. It may seem surprising, from one viewpoint, that the Oxford movement would be open

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<sup>3</sup> Morreim, 21.

to alcoholics, who were no models of success. However, the process of mutual confession in the Group offered a strong ministry to the needs of men whose consciences tended to be ridden with guilt. At the same time, it may have been because of the confessional nature of the Group's discussions that a parting of the ways took place between the Group's alcoholic and non-alcoholic members. For the alcoholics it was essential that they return again and again to their life before sobriety began, in order to appreciate the change which had been worked in their lives. Other members grew tired of hearing stories about past drinking and complained to the point that the alcoholics no longer felt welcome.

#### The Program in Action

Some years after the fellowship of alcoholics had formed its own organization, a man identified as "W." came into the Program which had developed from the steps which Bill Wilson had laid down.<sup>4</sup> W.'s story is taken from a set of case studies of recovering alcoholics. It contains many elements common to the stories of those who encounter the Twelve Step program. Summarizing his story will give a feel for the Twelve Step program.

Knowledge of W.'s personal background is not essential for understanding how the Program works in his life, but it

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<sup>4</sup> Clinebell, 520-22.



illuminates the contrast to his life after his recovery process has started. His story begins with a description of his childhood as one which was traumatized by the perfectionistic demands of his parents and his church, as well as frequent moves for his father's work. Fear of punishment and failure were a predominant feeling in his childhood and adolescence.

W.'s biography is picked up when he is about twenty years old:

W. left college after two years...and went into the advertising business. Right after he quit college, W. began to drink.... W. drank socially from age 20 to 27. When he was 32 he began to realize that it was a problem. He took his first morning drink at 31. By the time he was 39 he was having frequent alcoholic hallucinations in the form of angry critical voices. When W. was 41 his wife had all she could take. She got a divorce. Some months after his wife left, W. was ready to ask for help. He had just lost a good job...and looked like a "zombie."<sup>5</sup>

W. experienced the physical, psychological and relationship deterioration which is part of the downward spiral of dependency for many people, especially those who are chemically dependent. An increasing isolation from others characterized his experience as alcohol became the center of his life.

W. found an alternative to his current experience in his encounter with AA. Some essential dynamics of the AA

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<sup>5</sup> Clinebell, 520-21.

program can be seen in the following section of the case study:

He [W.] phoned his ex-wife and said, "I'm sick and I need help." His ex-wife and his mother brought an AA member to see him.... "The fellow came into the room.... I was going to brush him off. I thought he was talking about me [as he talked about alcoholism] but found out he was talking about himself. This was the first indication I had that anybody in the world understood how I felt.... I half promised him I'd go to a meeting." W. admits to someone else his need of help.<sup>6</sup>

W.'s experience can be described as a "deflation of the ego" to use a phrase coined by Bill Wilson.<sup>7</sup> First he realizes that he cannot help himself. Then he realizes that he is not the only one living in an alcoholic universe. From a more positive perspective, W.'s private hell was visited by another who understood. He was encountered by someone who identified with him and who had a story with which he could identify. He was invited to come out of his private world to a meeting of others who understood. His psychological defenses against getting help were breaking down. He was invited, by the testimony of another, to acknowledge his own dependency problem. He was invited to a meeting of alcoholics.

A stark contrast existed between how W. felt and how alcoholics at his first AA meeting appeared to him.

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<sup>6</sup> Clinebell, 521.

<sup>7</sup> Kurtz, 54.

The next two days were agony. The more I tried to get sober the more I shook. My wife took me by the hand and led me to a meeting at the clubhouse. I felt at ease the minute I got in--a respectable guy spoke...story like mine. I looked around. The people were clean, happy, and shaven.... I was mentally and physically exhausted...stayed in AA atmosphere as much as possible....I couldn't think--settled for something simple--just do what the guys who understood me said. The feeling of doom and insanity slowly passed--this is why the alcoholic is sure alcoholism is a physical disease.<sup>8</sup>

It appears that W. found the Twelve Step group inspirational and promising. A resolution to his problem was on the horizon, communicated through the lives of other alcoholics. Where his dependency promised only further illness, the program promised restored health in the lives of its members.

Some of the basic principles and mechanics of the Program can be seen as W. continued his story.

The fellow who sponsored me phoned me every morning--reminded me that it was another day and he'd see me that evening. He knew that I was lonely. From the first meeting on I began a process of reeducation--this is what AA is. I had never made a real decision before this.... Six months after AA I took a moral inventory--scared the hell out of me." After about nine months in AA, W. made restitution by apologizing to the man who had fired him. The two had a 3 1/2 hour talk, and his former boss has since referred nine AA prospects to him.<sup>9</sup>

It is apparent in this section of W.'s story how one alcoholic tries to stay sober by caring about another. The

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<sup>8</sup> Clinebell, 521.

<sup>9</sup> Clinebell, 521.

experience of a deeply meaningful fellowship took place in his life. It is also apparent that sobriety involves facing some of the wreckage caused in the past life and reconciling relationships. Its foundation is in the "moral inventory" which grew directly out of the confessional experience that the Oxford Group practiced religiously. The moral inventory begins with "a list of our defects or sins" as suggested above by Bill Wilson. It is carried out in confession, or sharing "our shortcomings with another person in confidence," also suggested in Wilson's original list of steps. Making amends to others, as one is empowered to do so, follows. It is one of the well springs for continued recovery. Honesty opens the door to resolution of one's problems.

In the previous paragraph, W. described AA as a "process of re-education." At the heart of this re-education is "decision making." W. felt that he had "never made a real decision" before coming into recovery. Other people, other forces, and various life events had shaped his life until that time, providing a rather self-destructive orientation. Now he was given both the freedom and responsibility for making decisions about his attitudes toward himself and life; about the habits and patterns that shape his lifestyle and the quality of his relationships with God and others. W. found this confrontation and

challenge in AA. He was offered the tools and support he needed to make wise and healthy decisions for himself.

W.'s re-education appears to move forward. The promise of the steps for recovery was realized as a sense of freedom. He experienced both a freedom from something and a freedom for something:

For a long time I felt that I would have to fight being an alcoholic all my life. Now it is different--freedom. The process of giving [to others] has a meaning in itself for me now. This is living.... Fear of failure--made me feel that life was so complicated. Unless I was a genius nothing counted.<sup>10</sup>

For W., this experience of freedom was coupled with awareness of a sense of new meaning in life. He had continued insights into the nature of his problem and how it was resolved, insights which he was willing to express. He was invited through the Program into a life of giving to others. What happened in W.'s life?

#### A Spiritual Awakening

The spiritual awakening for W. is seen in the unfolding of events both within him and outside of him. Theological development is an aspect of recovery from a dependency. After about a year in the program, W. began to realize the concept of a power beyond himself that could help him. This concept continued to deepen and develop through the six years of his sobriety:

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<sup>10</sup> Clinebell, 522.

The God idea made no impression on me before AA. The spiritual angle began to be a reality on a shallow basis along about the 10th or 11th month.... Now I realize that there's a wonderful power in me which has been there all along.... AA is completely a spiritual program--AA and the Higher power are one, but you can't tell a new drunk that. He feels that it isn't sporting to appeal to God--has to do it himself. Anyone who attempts to find help in this program finds God.<sup>11</sup>

Theological development brought W. to the door step of an enhanced sense of trust. He found a certain order and goodness to life that both drew on and reshaped his earliest experiences of life and God. He said:

When I get confused I appeal to a gigantic man--AA--like I would appeal to a father. When I get confused I just put up my hand as if walking with him (I got this idea from a Sunday School hymn.)<sup>12</sup>

In reviewing W.'s story, one can note with Clinebell: "[W.] shifted from dependence on the group to dependence on a Higher Power more inclusive than the group."<sup>13</sup> A spirituality which first surrounded W. in the group came to be embodied in his whole life and relationships. It is obvious that yielding to a Higher Power had to do with more than turni" from the bottle. In talking with newcomers, he turned his now embodied spirituality toward the fellowship with other alcoholics.

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<sup>11</sup> Clinebell, 521.

<sup>12</sup> Clinebell, 522.

<sup>13</sup> Clinebell, 520.

### The Roots of Renewal

What exactly are the origins of this spiritual awakening which W. experienced during the working of the Program? Both Bill Wilson and Doctor Bob Smith, co-founder of AA with Wilson, could acknowledge that the spiritual awakening of recovery had origins in forces beyond the human. In 1937 they reflected on the fact that at least 40 alcoholics were staying sober: "Suddenly it burst upon us- Something new has come into the world-a new life...where there was none before."<sup>14</sup> The "Something new" which Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith spoke of may be thought of as originating in the same mystery as that of any spiritual renewal or revival. On the other hand, some of its roots can be traced.

It can be argued that the spiritual awakening in recovery grows out of the fact that the steps which grew out of the Oxford Group experience describe a religious program which is tried and true. Clinebell described the program as it existed in the early 1950s:

Alcoholics Anonymous was found to be a radical modification of the Oxford Group theory and technique. AA is the most effective religious approach to the problem extant. Its strength lies in its acceptance of the sickness conception of alcoholism, its non-emotional techniques for inducing sobriety, its orderly program for personality change, its emphasis on mutual self-

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<sup>14</sup> Kurtz, 56-57.

help, and its ability to provide an accepting and permissive group experience.<sup>15</sup>

It is not difficult to see how Clinebell could describe the original AA program as a "religious approach" as he reviewed the origins and guiding principles of the Twelve Step movement.

Program members themselves, question whether it is a religious program. The AA philosophy is that it is a "spiritual rather than a religious program."<sup>16</sup> Why have they insisted on this distinction? Kurtz, for one, located the motivation for the distinction in the fact that alcoholics have "had more than their fill of pious admonitions to be good, and moralistic adjurations to be responsible."<sup>17</sup> A second answer is that the God described in the Program is a non-sectarian God. Sobriety came with letting go of some particular idea about God to be open to whatever form God might come. A third reason for the distinction is to keep the specific content of religion out of the official language of the Program. It is critical to the philosophy of the program that it does not work by replacing addiction with religion. This would be a

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<sup>15</sup> Clinebell, abstract.

<sup>16</sup> Kurtz, 176.

<sup>17</sup> Kurtz, 176.



distorted, incomplete and unhealthy form of change and is not a true working of the program.<sup>18</sup>

The most positive answer to why the program is spiritual rather than religious because it is centered in the present experience of living. When Bill Wilson had finished with his original list of six precepts for recovery in early 1939, he was unsatisfied with what he had set down. He decided it was too preachy and had too many loopholes that the alcoholic mind could crawl through to return to drinking. He set himself again to outline a simple procedure that was comprehensive, honest, and hopeful. When Wilson finished his second draft of "How It Works," he counted the steps and they amounted to twelve:

We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Were entirely ready to have God remove these defects of character.

Humbly on our knees asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Made a list of all people we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Made direct amends to such people wherever possible except when to do so would injure them or others.

Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

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<sup>18</sup> Wayne Oates, Alcohol: In and Out of the Church, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), 103.

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out.

Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.<sup>19</sup>

Of interest in this revision is the degree to which Bill Wilson added spiritual content. For example, his original final step was: "We prayed to whatever God we thought there was for power to practice this precept." This step was split into two steps, eleven and twelve. Language was added which included "conscious contact with God" and "having had a spiritual awakening." Wilson's inner spiritual life was revealed in these steps.<sup>20</sup> It was not only the forms of a religious practice which made Twelve Step recovery spiritual, but those forms filled by a real life experience. The two cannot be separated.

Spiritual experience and certain values cannot be separated in the Program, either. Prime value in the Program is placed on the sharing of one's life story with another person. Rather than speculate in his book Alcoholics Anonymous on how the spiritual awakening can

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<sup>19</sup> Kurtz, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Kurtz, 20. In the most detailed telling of his story, Wilson related lying in a hospital, drying out, in deep depression. He cried out to the God he did not believe in and later spoke of a new consciousness and a wonderful feeling of presence which brought him peace and a sense of rightness with the world.

happen, Bill Wilson seemed content to let the individual stories of recovery speak for themselves. His co-founder, Dr. Bob Smith, distilled the principles found in his own spiritual recovery story and those of his friends by saying "willingness, honesty and open-mindedness are the essentials of recovery....these are indispensable."<sup>21</sup> These values must be present in the Program or its spirituality would not be properly grounded.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Kurtz, 177.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Anon's Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (New York: Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1987), hereafter cited as Al-Anon's Twelve.) The values by which the Program operates are preserved in the Twelve Traditions, developed as Bill Wilson answered questions of how meetings should be conducted. By 1945, Twelve Traditions were being regularly reviewed at Twelve Step meetings. The Traditions are listed here in the language of AA's auxiliary group for spouses of alcoholics:

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal progress for the greatest number depends upon unity.
2. For our group purpose, there is but one authority--a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The relatives of alcoholics may call themselves a...family group, provided that they have no outside affiliation.
4. Each group should be autonomous, except in matters affecting another group or Al-Anon or AA as a whole.
5. Each...group has but one purpose: to help families of alcoholics. We do this by practicing the Twelve Steps of AA ourselves, by encouraging and understanding our alcoholic relatives, and by welcoming and giving comfort to families of alcoholics.
6. Our groups ought never endorse, finance, or lend our name to any outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property or prestige divert us from our primary spiritual aim. Although a

### Steps Toward the Church

Any spiritual awakening is a complex process. Surrender to a transcendent power, discovering the goodness of God in an accepting fellowship, and learning willingness, honesty and openmindedness, all play their part in life renewal. Spiritual awakening can take place within the life of the church or outside of it.

In honoring AA's distinction between a spiritual program and religion an important question arises. Can organized religion be beneficial to a recovery program characterized by spirituality? In W.'s spiritual awakening, for example, could the church could help him expand, deepen, continue is spiritual recovery experience? The answer is not obvious in his case. W. appears to feel comfortable

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separate entity we should always cooperate with Alcoholics Anonymous.

7. Every group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8. Twelfth-Step work should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9. Our groups, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

10. Groups have no opinion on outside issues; hence our name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press radio, TV and films. We need guard with special care the anonymity of AA members.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities.

with the fellowship of the Program itself, as a place to express his spiritual awakening. On the other hand, he uses an old Sunday School experience to image God. W.'s ongoing need for confession of his own needs and shortcomings, and his desire to work with fellow sufferers, could lead him to the doorstep of the church and its life within. However, there is no indication that W. is interested in a return to the church.

The above question is answered differently for some of W.'s peers. Some Twelve Step members look to the church for resources to undergird or to complete certain aspects of recovery. Many Twelve Step meetings open with a Serenity Prayer which is credited to the Christian theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr.<sup>23</sup> Meetings, almost invariably, close with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer. Many participants in Twelve Step meetings can be heard to identify their Higher Power by some Judeo-Christian symbol or recite religious affirmations or prayers at a typical meeting. The Bible forms a common bond between Program and church which is a natural bridge between the two for some people. Out of his work with recovering people, Morreim speaks of how the Bible is valued by many of them:

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<sup>23</sup> Bartosch and Bartosch, 45. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the different."

This Book tells the story of God's saving grace for all people. It is from the Bible, the Word of God, that bridges can be built and God's people can celebrate together.<sup>24</sup>

Many Twelve Step members look to church affiliation as an important part of their recovery. The need for the church was not at all foreign to the working of the program for Dr. Bob Smith. He was a life-long Episcopalian who remained active in the Oxford Group movement long after Bill Wilson had broken away from it. Wilson himself was raised as an agnostic, but some years after beginning his Twelve Step work he took instruction in the Roman Catholic faith from Archbishop Fulton Sheen. Despite his criticism of organized religion, Wilson felt some need or yearning for a religious program of his own. According to Kurtz, he was particularly attracted to the mystical elements of Catholicism.<sup>25</sup> His attraction might be more basic than that. Wilson described the alcoholic's religious yearnings this way.

More than most people, I think, alcoholics want to know who they are, what life is all about and whether they have a Divine origin and appointed destiny, and live in a system of cosmic justice and love.<sup>26</sup>

There is little reason to doubt that Wilson was reflecting on his own religious yearnings. The spiritual

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<sup>24</sup> Morreim, 132.

<sup>25</sup> Kurtz, 52.

<sup>26</sup> Kurtz, 177.

process of recovery opened up the prospects of a journey of discovery.

Why do some people in recovery programs actually seek out the church? Lynne Bundesen, a religious journalist who is somewhat critical of Twelve Step programs, describes what might be lacking from their spiritual fellowship:

What people [in Twelve Step meetings] don't get are some wonderful things; the rich imagery of the Church, the stories and examples of prophets and penitents, the heroes and heroines of the Bible. What they don't get is tradition--the familiar which binds us together in celebration and communion. What they don't get is the wisdom of the ages in the language of its most beautiful poets, daring politicians, far-sighted prophets... The meeting can go no farther than the highest thought being expressed at any one time.<sup>27</sup>

Michael Wyatt, substance abuse counselor and Episcopal priest, also acknowledges that some Twelve Step members need the church. He writes:

Some of their reasons are part of the essential work of recovery, which cannot be neglected. The foremost of these is the search for a place to do...a formal confession, with absolution.... Another is the use of a minister as a pastoral counselor with whom one can review the course of one's life and assess what needs to be done. Some look for a place to share spiritual journeys or to learn the discipline of prayer.... Still others look for a context or vehicle for "working with others."<sup>28</sup>

Of course other reasons are more personal. Some individuals look for a way to be reconciled with the

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<sup>27</sup> Bundesen, 92.

<sup>28</sup> Wyatt, 44.

religion of their past. For others, going to church is a symbolic way of returning to society. Others simply want an appropriate and explicit worship of the God that they understand is supporting them in recovery. Wyatt's summary goes a considerable way toward answering the question of why people in Twelve Step recovery might feel a need or take an interest in participation in a local church. These people may have been involved in church fellowship prior to recovery. On the other hand, people might have their first formal introduction to a religious-like community in these groups which claim to be non-religious and thus may be prepared for further religious community.

#### Steps Toward Integration of Program and Church

Built into the Program as a whole, is guidance for recovering people to extend recovery into community with God and with others. The church is a community which intentionally combines self, God, and others. Thus it offers a context in which to further realize the recovery suggested in the Program. Some of the particular steps of the Program suggest steps toward the church. These positive openings can be seen, perhaps, most clearly in the activities of active church members who are practicing the Twelve Steps. For these people some of the steps are very important integrative points between Program life and church life.



One member of Al-Anon [hereafter called "R"], whose son has been a cocaine addict and crack dealer, was a leader in her Lutheran church in Los Angeles. She found her ability to live life successfully was hampered by the deep distress over her son's plight. Often her thoughts were clouded with pictures of him sleeping and hungry in a burnt out house. She found that through the Al-Anon program she was able to give her son over to the care of God. Being able to release her son to her Higher Power also released time and energy for her to be concerned about other co-dependents. She shares the following story of what her recovery program motivated her to do:

Many of our own church members were hurting because of some kind of drug problem in their family. After going to some Overcomers meetings at a Baptist church, I asked the ladies in my Bible study for their support to start a group at Trinity. Many of them were with me, I could see. Our pastor issued an invitation on Easter Sunday to come to this meeting and several of our members have come, but few of them have kept coming. Many in our congregation are in denial about drug problems in their own family.

We use the Overcomers booklet in our meetings and a little pamphlet that goes with it. We run the meeting like a regular Twelve Step meeting, except in our sharing time on a particular step. There we include reflection time on Bible passages which relate to it. Most of the people who come to Overcomers feel good about the Bible, but not everyone who comes feels comfortable with the Church. Maybe they were really hurt by the Church or some church person in the past. So we don't push our church on the newcomers. We just have our meetings here. We aren't officially part of the church. We are a real ecumenical group. Some

of our church members come to a few meetings but don't return.<sup>29</sup>

In sharing her story, R.'s motivations are shown to be three-fold. There are expressions of particular steps in these motivations. She wanted to respond to the needs of some of her church friends who are being hurt by dependency problems in their own family. This is a direct application of the Twelfth Step of carrying the the message of recovery to others. Secondly, R. wanted to provide a place for continued reflection on life with God through religious resources which could aid people's theological thinking. This is an activity invited to happen by the Eleventh Step where meditation and reflection are critical for improving contact with God and seeking God's will. Thirdly, she seems interested to find ways that people can continue the confession and reconciliation process suggested in Steps Five through Ten.

The meeting format and literature which R. refers to is Overcomers Outreach. Developed by Bob Bartosch, a recovering alcoholic and his wife, Pauline, it is a program which was designed for Christians in recovery in Southern California.<sup>30</sup> Ed, a Twelve Step member who instituted an Overcomers meeting in his church, describes it as a place where people can come to work on their Third Step: "Made a

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<sup>29</sup> R., telephone interview with author, May 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Bartosch and Bartosch.

decision to turn our will and our live over to the care of God as we understood him."<sup>31</sup> He describes the church as the place "where you can work on your understanding of God."<sup>32</sup> Thus, he sees the church as a place to work on various components of one's Program. The church, he believes, needs the program as well, "a wholistic church ministry needs a hospital ward."<sup>33</sup> This conviction grows out of his experience of being an active church leader while he was a practicing alcoholic. A wider view of the ministry of the church was part of Ed's spiritual renewal.

Ed believes that an integration of his Program and church life can happen in Overcomers Outreach, using the following approach:

We choose a leader each meeting who follows a format of prayer, introduces himself or herself, then suggests a question for group sharing and assigns Bible verses which people can read and apply to their life. The leader offers guidance, but of course, the real leader is the Holy Spirit and we trust the Spirit to bring out what needs to be shared for the good of those who attend.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ed, personal interview with author, December 1990 (hereafter cited as Ed interview).

<sup>32</sup> Ed interview.

<sup>33</sup> Ed interview.

<sup>34</sup> Ed interview.

### The Movements of Spiritual Recovery

In the stories, observations and reflections of this chapter, a certain feel for the Twelve Step program has been given. At its center, this recovery program is spiritually grounded. The Program helps to open the lives of dependent people to an ongoing development of spiritual life.

At least three movements of spiritual awakening are possible in the lives of recovering people. For people such as W., who has had no ongoing spiritual component in his life, the first encounter with a power greater than himself is a social encounter. The Twelve Step group represents acceptance of his past life and hope for a new and better life. From the spirituality of the group, W. moves to a relationship with a Higher Power within himself. For him the movement is from outer experience to inner experience. Then, however, his individual spirituality is shared with other alcoholics in need of recovery. Inner spirituality seeks communal forms of expression. While in W.'s case there is no acknowledged expression of his spirituality in a religious community, other recovering people have sought fulfillment of their spiritual leanings in the community of the local church. Rather than thinking of Twelve Step programs as a religious approach to the problem of dependencies, as Clinebell did in the 1950s, the Twelve Steps may be thought of a preliminary stage of religious

education.<sup>35</sup> They open persons to the possibility of religious life without directing them to specific religious community as does a Christian or Jewish religious education.

Not all recovering people who are serious about religious life find a home in the church, as will be seen in the case of Bill Wilson in the next chapter. There are hindrances to participation in the church for recovering people. Some not only complete the transaction of church participation, but are led to attempt to integrate their Program into the practice of Christian ministry. It has been well established throughout the life of the Program, that ministers are likely candidates to hear the Fifth Step confession of recovering persons. However, contact with a pastor does not necessarily lead to contact with a congregation. The Third, Eleventh and Twelfth Steps of the Program seem especially able to orient the individual toward integration with the religious community.

This review indicates that Twelve Step recovery is accompanied by awakening to spiritual life. With its many connections to Christianity, the Program may bring unchurched inquirers into the life of the church. Church people in Twelve Step recovery may be inspired toward active

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<sup>35</sup> Clinebell.

integration of church and Program. The question remains, however, why are these inquiries and integration taking place so inconsistently?

## CHAPTER 3

### Hindrances to Participation in the Church

Twelve Step programs and the church have significant commonalties and draw from some of the same spiritual and social resources to sustain their life. There are bridges or overpasses between the two parallel roads described in the first chapter. Here and there, within the Twelve Step movement of today, are recovering people who are taking leadership in passing back and forth between the two programs. Some are even attempting to integrate the two. Why are not more people following their lead, when intercourse between the two programs seems so natural?

The problem is that certain obstacles lie between the recovery program and participation in organized religious life. Where are the obstacles or roadblocks on the overpass? Some are on the church side of the overpass. Some are on the Program side. Some lie within the psyche of the recovering individual. Other resistant forces lie in the history out of which the program developed.

#### Church-fostered Hindrances

The life of the church bears all the flaws and failings of any other human institution. People who are coming to grips with their dependencies and experiencing spiritual renewal may be sensitive to particular problems with the life of the church. In commenting on why he believes that

the church needs Twelve Step programs, recovery counselor Gary Wyatt writes:

Many churches, in order to survive, become dishonest, closed, unwilling to change. They live by denial, isolation, and relapse.<sup>1</sup>

Wyatt has noticed what Twelve Step members sometimes notice. Instead of tolerance, pluralism, openness and vulnerability, the lack of these qualities may be the marks of a Christian fellowship. One Twelve Step member contrasts the hypocrisy which she encounters in her church with the Twelve Step meeting:

I would sit there [in church] and look around me and see the hypocrisy and I'd be so mad that I wanted to get up and walk out. The preaching was about one thing and lives lived by my fellow church members were about another. Then I found these Twelve Step meetings where it is possible to talk openly, to say what is on my mind with no fear.<sup>2</sup>

Hypocrisy is not the only characteristic of the church which offends recovering people. Some recovering people identify the church with a message of condemnation and judgment toward their addictive behavior. By this posture, the church can create a resistance toward its ministry. Pastors and other church leaders may not appear to be open to the philosophy and workings of the Twelve Step program as a way to a saving relationship with God. Even if the predominant message they have heard in church is one of love

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<sup>1</sup> Wyatt, 44.

<sup>2</sup> Bundesen, 85.



and acceptance, the visceral feeling that the church is a scary place, with its demands and promised punishments. This feeling can last a lifetime.

A related obstacle is that the alcoholic in recovery may recall a message they once heard within a Christian context that uncontrollable drinking or some other dependency is a moral problem. This message carries with it a ring of untruth in adult experience. In the experience of childhood, the message may have been downright scary. The most obvious indication that W. might have some inhibition about church fellowship lies in his recollection of his Methodist Sunday School temperance lecturers who came around frequently, and "scared the hell out of me."<sup>3</sup> Clinebell describes this as "one of his [W.'s] most vivid and painful memories."<sup>4</sup>

Another concern for recovering people is that people within the church may be protected from confronting their own character defects. Two Episcopalians in a Twelve Step program tell about their priest:

He's a great organizer...but he's a terrible people person. He has no ability to get along with people...the congregation is the enabler [of this priest's dysfunctional ministry].<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Clinebell, 520.

<sup>4</sup> Clinebell, 520.

<sup>5</sup> Bundesen, 84.

The church, historically, has been willing to put up with unhealthy behavior among its lay and clergy leaders. This may be clearly evident to the observer and completely hidden to the participants. Recovering people have a low tolerance for open displays of dysfunctional behavior.

A problem related to the dysfunctional behavior of church leaders is these leaders support of the "addictive behavior of others."<sup>6</sup> Many forms of addictive behavior can exist among members of a church including co-dependency and alcoholism. Recovering people will be sensitive to this behavior and how it is enabled to continue. Co-dependency may often be noticed among people who are excessively nice or always trying to please the pastor. Alcoholism can underlie the behavior of a member who is not fulfilling their promised service to the church and always making excuses for their irresponsibility. Ann Wilson Schaef noticed how the clergy and laity in one congregation spent an "inordinate amount of time and energy 'ignoring' the fact of one leader's alcoholic behavior, believing they were caring for him but really helping him avoid recovery."<sup>7</sup>

Sociological factors associated with the church may provide additional hindrances to participation for recovering people. The recovering person may not feel

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<sup>6</sup> Ann Wilson Schaef, "Is the Church an Addictive Organization?," Christian Century 107 (Jan. 3-10, 1990): 19.

<sup>7</sup> Schaef, "Is the Church," 19-20.

comfortable in large groups of people or may not feel comfortable with religious ritual in general. There may be political, economic, or social class differences with the membership of a particular church. The old saying that "Sunday morning is America's most segregated hour during the week" may be applied here. This functional segregation, which goes on in the typical congregation, may feel uncomfortable to the recovering person who has experienced a more diverse fellowship.

#### Resistances within the Psychology of Recovering People

Some resistances to the life of the church may grow out of the personality of the dependent person. Since recovering persons are still growing spiritually and maturing psychologically, it is important that not too much be made of these particular resistances. They do not seem at all determinative for future religious life.

One hindrance to W.'s participation in the church might have been in a relatively immature religious development in his life. From his reflections on recovery, it is apparent that W. developed in the intellectual, spiritual, and ethical dimensions of his life. He shows ability to reflect on himself and his behavior, to reflect on the nature of a spiritual program, to restore damaged relationships and to reach out to others with problems. Yet, there were few indications that his religious imagination had developed. Though his conversion from

drunkenness to sobriety was certainly more than a psychological event, he seemed not to be privy to the diversity of forms through which he might conceptualize God or celebrate life with God. This recovering alcoholic stated that when he got confused he put up his hand as if he were walking with a gigantic man--AA. While he had been in his recovery program for six years, W. commented that this image was suggested to him by a Sunday School hymn which he had learned as a child. In this comment W. indicated clearly that he anthropomorphized his Higher Power, drawing upon a primary form of conceptualizing God. Though he referred to a Higher Power several times, indicating that fundamental theological reflection was going on in his life, his most specifically religious form of God is characteristic of a child, according to studies of faith development. Fowler might locate W.'s theological imagery in a "mythic-literal" stage of development, which he ascribes to a stage of childhood.<sup>8</sup>

An observation by W. about other alcoholics indicates another possible resistance to church fellowship. He says: "[a new drunk] feels that it isn't sporting to appeal to God--has to do it himself."<sup>9</sup> The fierce quest for independence and the stubborn insistence on self-reliance

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<sup>8</sup> James Fowler, Stages of Faith, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 149.

<sup>9</sup> Clinebell, 521.

which characterizes some dependencies can continue. Such a self-reliance has a certain compulsiveness to it which is hard to break. The Program member may find that the appeal to God, which is the invocation of every worshiping church, is still distasteful even in recovery.

A second form of self-reliance can also bring church participation into question. While not an active Twelve Step member herself, Bundesen identifies and argues for a "spiritual self-reliance" as the goal of recovery from co-dependency.<sup>10</sup> She regards the typical religious system as immature, allowing and encouraging dependency on religious professionals. With its white male priests and doctrines, she sees religion offering a mediation between God and the individual, where no mediation is needed. For her, it is important to accept full responsibility for one's salvation from dependency and then release that responsibility to a power greater than oneself.

In contrast to the resistance engendered by self-reliance is the resistance created by spiritual forces opposed to recovery. In the conversation of a Los Angeles area Overcomers Outreach group, members shared their struggles with getting to church on Sunday morning. One participant, L., acknowledged that "the devil didn't want me to go to church. He wanted me to stay in bed last

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<sup>10</sup> Bundesen, 29.

Sunday."<sup>11</sup> His comment received a round of nods from other members. In this group, which meets in a black church, the devil is alive and at work to retard the spiritual aspect of recovery. "I had to resist the devil to get there," insisted L., "and he went away, but he'll be back again. He wants me to get back into using. Then he can control me." This resistance to church attendance felt by L. may be explained as a psychological resistance of some kind or the vestiges of the self-isolating habits that go with some forms of addiction. However, it is important to see that from the viewpoint of these Overcomers, this hindrance is attributed to the work of the devil. It might be tempting for them, at times, to excuse their lack of involvement with the church by referring to the interference of an evil force.

#### Program-Fostered Hindrances

A satisfying experience of spiritual fellowship within the Program can color one's feelings about the church. Lynne Bundesen attended Adult Children of Alcoholics meetings for a year exploring her own co-dependency and investigating both the dynamics within the Program and the dynamics between recovery and church fellowship. She was impressed by the spirituality of one meeting: "the raw power I felt in this ACoA meeting was different than any

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<sup>11</sup> L., group interview with author, Jan. 1991.

feeling that I have ever had in a traditional church service."<sup>12</sup>

Lynne Bundesen wondered why

this meeting was not upstairs in the sanctuary on Sunday morning, but down here in the basement on a Wednesday night. It was, it seemed to me, church with no fancy clothes, no pretensions, no airs.<sup>13</sup>

Many people are put off with the church as a place to display one's finest features, after they have encountered the genuineness and come-as-you-are quality of Program meetings. The resistance to dress-up or fix up one's self for church keeps many away from Sunday morning worship.

Another satisfying element within the program may be anonymity. Anonymity is a quality of the Program, which recovering people will be hard put to maintain in a local church. They may resent the "nosiness" of church members. The Program's freedom to come and go, with no questions asked, is cherished by many members. With anonymity, there is little pressure to supply personal information or justify one's presence or absence. With anonymity, time, energy, and abilities may be freely given or withheld from the group. The Twelve Step group demands much less ongoing commitment of personal information or resources than does a church.

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<sup>12</sup> Bundesen, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Bundesen, 23.

In her research Bundesen also noted within the Program a certain democracy which was compelling.

There is no mother or father to say that children should be seen and not heard. There is no [authority figure]...to revise the story being told. There are only people who share the same problems and who support and inform each other's insights.<sup>14</sup>

Those who experience a Twelve Step program may be particularly sensitive to the system of hierarchical relationships which many church members accept as a normal part of the church. The experience of spiritual authority in the recovery group grows out of group conscience and is maintained in a rotation of leadership, in contrast to the external authority mediated by hierarchical relationships within most churches. This sensitivity to hierarchy can spill over into theological concerns: "How God is defined and by whom, makes a difference in the political and the religious world."<sup>15</sup> Step Three specifically denies that anyone other than the recovering person has the power to describe who their God is.

Particular spiritual fellowships will develop a language all its own which may be more comfortable to use than the language of the church. Some Twelve Step programs teach a particular jargon to describe behavior and

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<sup>14</sup> Bundesen, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Bundesen, 89.



experience which the church does not tend to use. Bundesen says about her introduction into ACoA:

I spent hours and days reading and trying to understand the literature that I picked up at the ACoA meeting. It was not easy going. It was similar to the experience of moving to a foreign country.... The language was different.... There was a new dialect to be learned. I added the words "enabler" and "caretaker"...to my vocabulary. I had always thought that the word boundary had to do with real estate...but I learned that "crossed boundaries" were incursions by another person into the realm of the individual and that "setting boundaries" was essential to the reclaiming of the territory of the independent ego. I learned that the language was about the self.<sup>16</sup>

The recovering person may find that such terminology as quoted above may carry quite different connotations in the church. For example, it is popular for ministers to be called "enablers" in that they help others to exercise their own ministry. "Caretaking," often a negative term for recovering dependents, is a highly valued ministry in the church and may be a significant term in the church's "idiom."<sup>17</sup>

Additional resistance to church fellowship from within the Program may grow more out of its existence as a self-help group than as a spiritual fellowship. Albers is concerned that Program members can establish themselves as a

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<sup>16</sup> Bundesen, 24.

<sup>17</sup> James Hopewell, Congregations: Their Stories and Structures, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 96-97.

group of "elite outcasts."<sup>18</sup> The use of the Program by some members as "the totality of their religious experience... judging the church superfluous," indicates the kind of in-group mentality that can create resistance to the church.<sup>19</sup> A hindrance to W.'s participation in the church is that the fellowship of alcoholics seems to supply nearly all of his social and spiritual needs. Once comfortable in the spiritual fellowship of the Program, some find it easy to remain there. It is possible that W. would feel uncomfortable with spiritual language other than that used by Program members. Relationships with people unaffected by his problem, and without the protection of anonymity, might also be uncomfortable to him.

#### Some Historical Tensions

Hindrances to participation in the church by Twelve Step members have a variety of origins and possible resolutions. Holding some of them in place, however, are tensions between the Program and organized religion which grow out of the experience and guidance of its founders. The figure of Bill Wilson looms large in the establishment of these tensions as he led the original group of sober alcoholics away from the Oxford Group, made the decision not

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<sup>18</sup> Albers, 247-51.

<sup>19</sup> Albers, 247.

to be affiliated with the Catholic Church, and as he formulated the Twelve Traditions.

The Twelve Steps and the Oxford Group

Although the relationship remained cordial between the Oxford fellowship and those who left, problems did develop. One problem, already described in this project, was the complaining by non-alcoholic Oxford Group members that the alcoholics among them spent too much time talking about their drinking at the Oxford Group meetings. Though this was precisely the genius of the AA program which subsequently developed, i.e. to replace drinking with talking with another alcoholic, it irritated the religious group.<sup>20</sup>

Another point of conflict between Wilson's alcoholics and the Oxford Group lay in the Oxford Group's avoidance of offending people with direct confrontation about the problems in their lives.<sup>21</sup> Wilson and his sober friends had discovered that honesty, even when it offended, was a sobering and thus helpful quality to uphold in its mission to alcoholics.

The whole matter of religious tolerance provided a third conflict point. Though the twelve steps are a testimony to Wilson's personal religious conversion and religious practice as shaped in the Oxford Group, there is a

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<sup>20</sup> Kurtz, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Kurtz, 50.

tolerance built in to them. This is exemplified by the phrase "God, as we understood him." Tolerance was a critical feature for Wilson to include for several reasons. One was that some of his fellow alcoholics had experienced a psychological, but not a religious transformation on the way to sobriety, and their experience of transformation needed to be respected. A second reason was that Wilson, from his early tutelage by a self-consciously agnostic grandfather, had a deep philosophical problem with absolutes of the kind which the Oxford movement purveyed.<sup>22</sup> A third reason was the fear that aggressive evangelism with a certain religious viewpoint would scare off alcoholics in the future.

#### Bill Wilson's Near Conversion to Catholicism

As one looks back on the life story of the founder of the Twelve Step program, there are several hints as to why he never joined a church after his association with the Oxford movement and his spiritual awakening. He certainly saw the church as a place to connect with one's Higher Power and work on the steps of recovery. Bill Wilson was quite drawn to Catholicism and had many friends among both Catholic laity and clergy. It has been commonly held that he was afraid that his affiliation with one particular religious tradition might "adversely affect Alcoholics Anonymous."<sup>23</sup> This in fact may be part of the reason why,

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<sup>22</sup> Kurtz, 51.

after taking instruction in the Catholic faith, he decided not to join the church.<sup>24</sup> Kurtz notes, however, that his correspondence to a friend in 1948 reveals a picture more consistent with his earlier problems with the Oxford Group. With reference to the doctrine of papal infallibility he wrote, "These excursions into the absolute are rather beyond me. Though no disbeliever at all in miracles, I still can't picture God working like that."<sup>25</sup> Wilson reinforces his abhorrence of absolutist claims in a letter to another friend and mentor within the same period of time: "The thing that still irks me about all organized religion is its claim [of] how confoundley right all of them are."<sup>26</sup> These comments were made within his discussion of Catholic theologians' claims about the efficacy of the sacraments.

In these above comments we see the deep philosophical resistance that Bill Wilson carried toward particular religious movements and traditions. Many alcoholics over the years have identified their pain in accepting religious absolutes as standards, but falling short when trying to live up to them. Wilson rejected such claims from his youth. According to Kurtz, he was consistent in rejecting them, even though he was deeply drawn to many elements of

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<sup>23</sup> Kurtz, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Kurtz, 52.

<sup>25</sup> Kurtz, 52.

<sup>26</sup> Kurtz, 52.

the Catholic faith.<sup>27</sup> One might say that he believed in the value of the Catholic Church but not in the absoluteness of its philosophical or theological claims.

#### A Summary of Hindrances to Religious Participation

The church itself creates some of the hindrances to people who might be stimulated to seek its fellowship through their spiritual recovery. The church may not be as open and accepting of new people or new thinking as a recovering person would like it to be. The denial of personal problems by members of a congregation may strike the recovering person as hypocrisy. Recovering people may witness church members enabling one another to stay in denial of their character defects or dependency problems. Recovering people may carry memories of when their own personal problems were condemned or misunderstood by the church and its representatives; painful reminders of their feelings of hopelessness or unacceptability. The sociological fact of the church as a relatively segregated community may reinforce feelings of unacceptability in recovering people as they experience the church.

Some resistance to the church may lie within the psyche of the recovering person. Various forms of self reliance may stimulate a resistance to the church where people tend to depend on intermediaries with the spiritual world;

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27 Kurtz, 52.

intermediaries such as priests, liturgies, church structures. Some recovering people may not have matured in the religious dimension of their personality and may find the theological symbols or liturgical practices of the church to be too complex for their simple faith. Some recovering people who recognize their resistance to the church may attribute it to a spiritual force who is powerfully opposed to recovery in general, and recovery in Christian fellowship in particular.

The experience of the Program may be satisfying to the extent that the life of the church does not look very inviting. The Program may be experienced as a fellowship-of-equals, ruled by democratic principals which are dear to the heart of the average American. Few churches are run democratically. The jargon which one learns in the Program can take primacy as the language through which experience is given meaning. The language used in the church may seem less meaningful or more confusing than the language in the Program. Program members, in rare instances, can form an in-group mentality which judges other spiritual communities as superfluous.

The historical development of the Twelve Step program was shaped by certain tensions present in the Program's establishment and early maintenance. A key to the recovery process is a regular identification and discussion of one's dependency problem; something which was frowned upon by non-

alcoholic members of the Oxford Group. With a philosophy and practice of tolerance for the religious orientation of one another, recovering people have been uncomfortable with the claims of a particular religious tradition.

In reviewing the hindrances to participation in the life of organized religion for the recovering person, it is apparent that there is an attraction to the religious life. Bill Wilson nearly converted to Catholicism as he worked his recovery program into all dimensions of his life. W. was attracted to the religion of his youth because of both its terrifying power and its fascination and comfort. Recovering people may want certain features of religion in their life, but are aware that religion makes certain demands which may be costly to recovery or destructive to the spirituality achieved in the Program.

One of the essential features of a severe dependency problem is the sense that there are no choices in life. The enslavement to an addictive substance, relationship, or pattern of behavior colors all the decisions which the dependent person makes. Recovery may be described, simply, as the restoration of the freedom of choice. This new found freedom affects all life decisions, including the important decision of social and religious affiliation. If there is any one principle which plays in all the hindrances cited above, it may well be the maintenance of a freedom of choice. For many recovering people, the freedom to reject



the judgmental authority of corporate religion is a way to be free of the shame and guilt which have bound them. For others, the power to reject the devil's temptation to stay away from church is a sign that freedom of choice is being maintained. Either type may appreciate opportunities for exploring organized religious life in contexts which are not threatening to their hard won freedom.

## CHAPTER 4

## Recovery and Discovery in the Church

The parallel highways of Twelve Step program and church have both openings and obstacles between them for the recovering person. Some integrative activities may be intentionally engaged in with Program participants who seek participation in the church. Consideration and development of some educational activities with recovering people will be particularly rewarding for the parish minister. This is true both because of the educational nature of the Program and educational possibilities in the church.

The Twelve Step program offers the recovering person a starting point for a lifetime of spiritual renewal and learning, one day at a time. One recovering alcoholic interviewed by Howard Clinebell suggested that a Twelve Step program is "a primary school where a person can learn what ails him...but he must continue to grow emotionally and spiritually."<sup>1</sup> It might be argued as well, that the Program is a process of religious education for a particular group of people. It guides them out of a state of dependency and motivates a commitment to some of the highest aims of human religious life, such as trust in God and reconciliation with others. One of the strengths of the church is that the

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<sup>1</sup> Clinebell, 515.

church environment can entertain a variety of different approaches to religious education. A variety of educational resources can aide both the recovery of health, relationships and purpose in life and the discovery of ultimate meaning.

This chapter will tell the story of one church which is already integrating Twelve Step members into its program and one teaching methodology which has great potential for improving the model suggested in the church's story. A description of the range of teaching approaches which can compliment this particular methodology will be offered, as well as a description of an overall model for parish ministry which could support it. Woven throughout the chapter some of the hindrances to participation in the church for recovering people are identified with suggestions of how these obstacles and resistances can be appreciated by the church and yet overcome by recovering people.

#### A Church for Extending Recovery

The ministry of one congregation, the Celebration Center in Colton, California, seeks to establish recovering people in the whole life of a particular religious community. Its story is offered here as a model for continuing the process begun in recovery. It might be described as a model which integrates group counseling and instructional methods.

The ministry of the Celebration Center with recovering people developed out of its unique history and unique sense of mission. The Celebration Center is a congregation of about 1200 worshipers, most of whom are of Seventh-Day Adventist roots. The church came into existence in the latter 1980's with the breaking away of a parish pastor from the congregation he was serving. It was his feeling that traditional Adventist forms of worship, fellowship, and piety were not meeting the spiritual needs of Adventists in the eastern San Gabriel Valley. He had noticed that many were inactive in their congregations in this area of heavy Adventist concentration. Rising socio-economic status had given them a new sense of freedom in life and they were tired of the formality of their faith tradition. This feeling was shared by a few hundred of his parishioners who hungered for the spontaneity which is often associated today with the Holy Spirit.

The pastor and these parishioners became a break-away group which no longer depended on a strong affiliation with the larger Adventist Church for support. They rented facilities from a large Assemblies of God church nearby for their Saturday morning activities. They met to worship in an informal style, using songs texts which were biblical passages set to music. The Celebration Center worship leaders made use of multimedia to present the Gospel message. Videotape presentations, live drama, and a live

band were among the offerings at the two worship services held each Saturday morning. Children and youth were heavily involved in the services. Families and individuals from a wide array of ethnic backgrounds, many of them lapsed Adventists, were soon attending the worship services.

Under the direction of the founding pastor, a large staff has developed. A lay pastor training program began two years ago. It is used to recruit and train the lay leadership which is considered to be the vitalizing force in this new religious community.

An important moment in the life of this congregation came when a member named Ellie felt the call to teach an adult study course on healing as a part of the Sabbath Education Hour. As she remembers it:

I didn't know how to do the course or even why I was doing it, but participants seemed to especially respond to the openness of others about the pain in their daily lives. I used an evangelically oriented book on healing as a resource. I tried to relate my personal experience to it during the class.

Eventually two things happened. One was that I began to feel overwhelmed by the number of people who wanted to talk privately with me about their problems. I knew that I couldn't be there for all those who needed healing. The second thing that happened was after one of our class sessions a member came up to me and told me that I sounded like I had grown up in a dysfunctional family. She was a Twelve-Stepper, and suggested that an Al-Anon or ACoA meeting was the place for me to begin to explore the behavior and feelings which were bringing me pain. I went to one, and it seemed like all the dysfunction in my life was laid out on the table. I started to go regularly

to ACoA and realized that I had some place to send the people who were coming to me for help.<sup>2</sup>

Ellie talked to the senior pastor about her experience and they decided to investigate a church in Portland, Oregon which was incorporating Twelve Step language and practices into its parish fellowship. In attending a conference sponsored by this church, New Life Fellowship, Ellie learned about resources available to her for starting a program at Celebration Center. Among these were a videotape series on family dysfunction by John Bradshaw<sup>3</sup> and one on co-dependency by Terry Kellogg.<sup>4</sup> The Bradshaw series, in particular, offered theological perspectives on dependency.

Ellie opened a Twelve Step meeting on Sabbath morning for people to come to after attending this series. She felt that people who had become aware of the dependency in their lives and families needed a place to work on recovery. These meetings were for both Twelve Step members and newcomers to issues of dependency. These meetings tended to follow a set pattern. A period of scriptural song singing provides a time of preparation for the meeting; the meetings begin with introductions around the circle during which participants state their first name and their problem

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<sup>2</sup> Ellie Minesinger, interview with author, March 1990.

<sup>3</sup> John Bradshaw, The Family in Crises, VHS videocassette (n.p.: Bradshaw Cassettes, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Terry Kellogg, Codependency, six VHS videocassettes (Dallas: Family Recovery, 1987).

dependency. A review of the Twelve Steps follows, with reflection upon biblical passages related to each step.

Following this open meeting, participants are invited to join a group (which closes to newcomers) for more in-depth sharing over a period of weeks. Prayer and meditation follow the group sharing time. This is also encouraged in individual spiritual work beyond the meetings. It is possible for the recovering dependent who comes into this program to be assigned a lay pastor "to listen and guide them" following the meeting or at some other time during the weeks.<sup>5</sup>

At this writing, Twelve Step meetings are being offered on Monday and Thursday evenings as well as on the Sabbath. About 150 persons attend the church's Twelve Step groups in any given week. Most people who continue their involvement in Ellie's "New Life Victorious" program at the Celebration Center are regular attenders of a community Twelve Step program which relates to their addiction. Those who show a commitment to the congregation are invited to enter the lay pastor training program in the church. After training they assigned leadership positions which Ellie says are given "according to the gifts given them by the Holy Spirit".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Minesinger. This is akin to the sponsorship which goes on in a Twelve Step program between the recovering person and another known for either their long experience in the program or their spiritual maturity.

<sup>6</sup> Minesinger.

Last year Ellie was recognized for her teaching, administrative and counseling gifts. She was named Associate Lay Pastor of the congregation with full status as a staff member. One of her duties is to give information and training to leaders of other local churches who come with an interest in starting a Twelve Step program or integrating recovering people into their church.

The work of the Celebration Center with recovering dependents makes use of several ministry forms, including worship, fellowship, pastoral care and others. The major focus of this work is on the healing of emotions and relationships. It is intentionally educational at three points, at least. Ministry for recovery involves instruction in the nature of dependency and recovery, first of all. Secondly, it offers living models of how people are carrying out Twelve Step recovery in the life of the church. Ellie and her co-leaders model an openness to both the ministry of the church and the work of the program which captures the spirit of education in the life journey. Thirdly, recovering people are invited into lay pastor training for more effective witness and care of others.

Besides instruction, modeling and training there are less formal educational processes involved at Celebration Center which may have a significant impact on the integration of recovery into the life of the church. It should be noted that some of the hindrances to participation



in the church, identified in this project, are overcome through the ministry approach used by the Celebration Center. For one thing, participants in the closed Twelve Step groups at the Celebration Center can experience something of what Christian fellowship can be like when the denial aspect of dependency is broken through. The breaking of denial seems to transcend the closed meetings and impact the whole congregation. Ellie was asked, following one closed meeting, "What would the typical Seventh-Day Adventist notice as different about this church?" She replied:

It would be the greater level of honest confession in our church. Adventists are used to coming to church with a good Christian front of being successful, happy, and having the family relations in order. Here, we don't pretend anymore, to have or be all those things. I think the typical Adventist would be shocked by what we say about our selves and our experience in some of these rooms. We name our addictions and compulsions and how they make life unmanageable for us.<sup>7</sup>

This feature of congregational life would be a breath of fresh air for many who see the average church in denial.

The program of the Celebration Center respects the need of some to be part of a self-help group. Yet, recovering people learn ways to move beyond the self-help group

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<sup>7</sup> Minesinger.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Groome, Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 184.

mentality. Holding the worship services and Twelve Step groups back to back can help extend a sense of shared experience beyond the dependency experiences and experiences of group process which Twelve Step members have. It is possible for group members to share in the same meeting and then move on to share in the same worship liturgy. Twelve Step members can learn that a recovery program can be supported by both small group of fellow sufferers and a larger community of fellow travelers in spiritual life.

#### A Pedagogy for Interaction with Christian Tradition

The ministries of the Celebration Center described above, and Overcomers Outreach described in Chapter 2, contain several critical moments of education for recovering people. People who encounter these ministries are asked to identify their motives for doing Twelve Step work. In the group sharing they are invited to reflect on the motivations and consequences of their present work of recovery. The reading and application of scripture passages and stories provides encounter with the Christian tradition. People are invited to commit to further recovery through leadership of meetings and lay leadership training. At the Celebration Center, these education moments are guided by a group of people who are practicing their own recovery program and sharing their learnings as they go along. All of these moments have their counterpart in the secular Twelve Step program. They also have their counterpart in a contemporary

educational methodology which may be particularly helpful in the integrative work of interest in this project.

Thomas Groome, a religious educator on the east coast, has described five "movements" of Christian education which are undertaken as "shared praxis."<sup>8</sup> These movements correlate with some of processes of Twelve Step groups and with the moments in the education of recovering people at the Celebration Center. They are, however, made more intentional. The five movements of shared praxis are listed here with only slight variations from Groome's phrasing:

1. naming our present activity around the topic for attention;
2. reflecting upon the motivations and consequences of our present actions;
3. encountering a Christian story around the topic for attention and encountering the faith response which the story invites;
4. entering into critical dialogue between our activity and the Christian story; and
5. choosing a personal faith response for the future.

Groome describes these movements as they take place in classroom or retreat settings, but a myriad of life settings are available for engagement with them.

Groome's methodology is provocative. It provides a way to help people integrate their life journey with a

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particular Christian religious community and its tradition and vision. The five movements of shared praxis encapsulate a journey of learning. Groome's metaphor for the spiritual life is that of a pilgrimage in time.<sup>9</sup> Religious education activity during this pilgrimage promotes and enables a conscious relationship with God to come to expression.<sup>10</sup>

Groome's work is especially commendable because it suggests an experience that needs to take place as some of the obstacles to participation in the Christian tradition are met and worked through. A movement of critical reflection is made a very intentional part of the educational process. What does this mean specifically? In the case of the Celebration Center it means that recovering people could be invited to do critical reflection upon the recovery communities they are involved in. They could be guided to reflect on the strengths and limitations of both the Program and the church could make a critical difference in how and to what degree recovering people integrate their Program and their church life.

For Groome, critical reflection is a key movement within a particular way of gaining an empowering knowledge for living and life mission. The spiritual pilgrimage is undertaken for the sake of coming to wholistic spiritual knowledge rather than a knowledge detach from some aspects

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<sup>9</sup> Groome, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Groome, 22.

of life. Knowledge of the origins, destination, process and problems of the journey comes through praxis; through the daily practice of living and reflection upon this practice.<sup>11</sup> This knowledge cannot be theoretical or speculative, because truth requires doing from his perspective. Groome's understanding of how knowledge is gained is in keeping with the philosophy of the Twelve Step program at this point.

Praxis knowledge is gained with guidance by a fellow learner in the spiritual process. The teacher of recovering people will structure a learning experience based on their own reflection on the practice of life and recovery. In an educational experience at the Celebration Center, for example, Ellie Minesinger might use Groome's method with recovering people by choosing a theme from one of the Twelve Steps that relates to the Christian life. The Third Step of turning "our will and our life over to the care of God as we understood him," for example, might be the topic in a retreat setting with recovering people. The first movement might involve eliciting a personal statement from each participant on their present feelings, understandings, or activities related to surrender to God. The second movement might involve the naming of past experiences which shape one's present attitude or behavior as well as projecting the

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<sup>11</sup> Groome, 156.

possible consequences of extending this mindset or lifestyle. Questions about when one first experienced a trust in God and what life would be like with a firmer trust in God might be asked in this movement. In the third movement, a biblical story might be retold. For example, the story of Saul might be told from Acts 9. Saul was a rather compulsive persecutor of Christians who became powerless through blindness caused by an appearance of Christ. He was asked to surrender his will, to put his life in the care of some of those he was persecuting. His faith response can be retold. Critical reflection upon the story of Saul in light of one's own surrender process would make up the fourth movement. "How does Saul's surrender process affirm, question, push us in our own Third Step activity?" might be a question to explore. "How did it reshape the thinking and activities of the early church?" might be another. A third question might be "How might current expressions of church life be called into question as the surrender process deepens and continues?" In a final movement of shared praxis, retreat participants might be asked to name a specific and concrete hope for the future that will renew and continue the Twelve Step or Christian tradition in their relationships. They might be invited to make a commitment of some action toward the realization of that hope. This would become a new present activity to

reflect on in light of the Christian story or vision. The stage is set for future shared praxis education.

It must be said that Thomas Groome did not specifically address educational ministry for recovery when he developed his approach. However, the pedagogical method he suggests has great promise as a group approach to education with recovering people. Their current life experience in the Program can be honored throughout an encounter with, critique of and appropriation of the Christian tradition and vision.

One of the attractive features of the shared praxis pedagogy for use with recovering people is that it addresses at least three of the hindrances to participation in organized religion which were recognized by the founders of the Twelve Step movement. The exercise of naming one's present activity and experience invites the recovering persons to talk about their life before and after recovery in the context of Christian fellowship, something which was not encouraged in the Oxford Group. Non-Twelve Step participants in shared praxis would expect to hear the alcoholic talk about their drinking and sobriety or the co-dependent talk about their learning about dysfunctional behavior as their point of entry into the story of the Christian community. Secondly, the problem with intolerance and absolutism would be addressed in the fourth movement of shared praxis where mutual critique between ones story and

the Christian story is allowed and encouraged. The recovering person would be led to see that religious belief is formed and appropriated in dialogue and testing rather than through indoctrination.

Within this fourth movement, as well, the whole issue of language could be addressed by the recovering person. Some who may not feel comfortable with language which grows out of hierarchical or male thinking, might open this issue within the movement of critical reflection. They might ask, for example, "Does it work for a co-dependant woman to surrender to a God who is thought of as male?" This may be especially critical for women who have identified submission to male authority figures as part of their dependency problem.<sup>12</sup> Their commitment in the fifth movement, in fact, might be to acquire and use new wording to describe the process of yielding to a power greater than themselves. Religious belief in this process would not only be acquired but shaped in ways that further empower recovery.

The shared praxis pedagogy of Thomas Groome values some of the basic educational processes used by a Twelve Step program. Naming present activity, reflecting on motivations and consequences, and making action oriented decisions are all vital to the ongoing recovery process of the Twelve

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<sup>12</sup> Gail Unterberger, "Twelve Steps for Women Alcoholics," Christian Century 106 (Dec. 6, 1989): 1150-152.



Steps. Critical reflection upon the tradition, vision, and present life of one's spiritual community, is not so intentionally a part of the Twelve Step program as it is for Groome.

### Education for Discovery

The five movements of shared praxis provide a good framework for setting up educational experiences which are sensitive to Twelve Step concerns and persons. It could do so unobtrusively. In other words, it could offer shared praxis experiences for the whole community, not just singling out Twelve Step people for Christian religious education, but including them with other inquirers into the life of wholistic renewal. However, it would only encourage a new form of dependency to suggest that the shared praxis methodology is the only effective educational means for working with recovering people. It will suffice to say that a shared praxis model could encounter recovering people at significant points of integration with the life of the church and spin off into a whole variety of educational experiences available for them in the church.

Groome's model is included among one "family of models" for religious belief formation described by Sara Little.<sup>13</sup> In a metaphor reminiscent of the bridge metaphor which has

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<sup>13</sup> Sara Little, To Set One's Heart: Belief and Teaching in the Church, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 40-41.

surfaced here and there in this project, Little describes beliefs as "avenues" through which a trust orientation to life may be refined and anchored in deeper levels of meaning.<sup>14</sup> Belief formation is relevant to the spiritual recovery described in this project. Twelve Step members have come into a basic trust in a Higher Power and a spiritual orientation to life through their Program. Many may seek to find their place in the larger picture of social and spiritual life. Those who seek out the church may be in search of what Little calls "enabling beliefs," those beliefs which bring integration and integrity to life.<sup>15</sup> Her work is helpful in delineating specific ways in which recovering people can locate themselves near the wellsprings of ongoing spiritual development.

In addition to an "action/reflection" model for belief formation, which includes the shared praxis approach, Little describes "personal development," "group interaction," "information processing," and "indirect communication" families of models. These families of models may be especially helpful in assisting recovering persons to become more fully self-integrated, more fully aware of the integrity of religious community, and more able to deal with the hindrances to their participation in religious

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<sup>14</sup> Little, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Little, 33.

community. Each of these families of models will have some commonalities with the Program of the Twelve Steps, though none as extensively as the one described above.

A personal development approach may be especially helpful in assisting recovering people to gain an enabling belief about the self. When people are aware of being positive selves, loved and called into meaningful tasks, they are able to think with more clarity and honesty about their own convictions, freedoms, and limitations. Ways of assisting personal development include the use of metaphorical thinking, self-evaluation and goal setting exercises, developing individual learning contracts, and utilizing role-playing and simulation experiences.<sup>16</sup> The educational minister will be an "advocate and guarantor," "facilitator," "resource person," and "reflective counselor" for recovering persons in the personal development process.

Some of the secular human relations training courses, such those of Dale Carnegie and Associates of Garden City, New York, are clear models of this approach. One person, who has used portions of this model in a Christian approach recovering people is Gloria Owens, a Christian educator in Southern California.<sup>17</sup> She has assembled a variety of

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<sup>16</sup> Little, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Gloria Owens, telephone interview with author, Nov. 1990.

inventories of personal development which people may take and she helps them relate their discovered weaknesses to aspects of co-dependency and discovered strengths to aspects of faith development. In the first phase of their learning, Owens acts as resource person and reflective counselor. Her goal is to bring the self-evaluated persons together in groups for support and exercises toward their unfinished psycho-social tasks. In this second phase, the facilitator role would come to the fore.

An information processing family of models can be useful in helping recovering persons learn the Christian tradition, to come to an enabling belief about the Christian inheritance. To gain access to the memory and language of the Christian tradition is a goal of this approach. With such knowledge and language, recovering people will be able to make an informed judgment about where they stand and what they experience in relation to the faith tradition. This approach assumes that all people need to have intellectual tools for handling facts, imposing structure on experience, and developing "conceptual goggles" which can be used to make sense of life.<sup>18</sup> In this approach the educator is organizer of both subject matter and the process by which thinking is sequentially guided. In his work on building bridges of understanding between the Bible and the Twelve

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<sup>18</sup> Little, 40.

Steps, Dennis Morreim acts as a director of learning in the information processing fashion.<sup>19</sup> His work is especially helpful in that he weaves a commentary on the heritage of the Oxford Group throughout his development of the theological concepts related to recovery. A directed book study of Morreim's work could be a valuable information processing activity for recovering people.

Another model described by Little is group interaction. To appreciate the possibilities of creative and responsible community is the focus of this approach. This model focuses on "clarifying and interpreting ideas, testing them against the perceptions of others...or applying them to the present."<sup>20</sup> The goal is to construct an informed knowledge of the community which includes the perspectives of others. A second goal is to build social responsibility toward the community. The Twelve Step program itself is an example of this educational approach. The use of this model in the church might help recovering people become comfortable with religious life through its similarity to the Program's group process.

Some of the hindrances to church participation might be effectively addressed through the techniques employed in group interaction approaches. In these approaches a

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<sup>19</sup> Morreim.

<sup>20</sup> Little, 40.

democratic process is employed by an educator skilled in guiding group process. One might imagine a group process devoted to naming the obstacles which recovering people encounter and resistances they carry toward church participation. A question to guide such group process might be "which of these hindrances are well founded and need to be addressed by the community?" For example, the church is criticized by some recovering people as a place where addictive behavior is encouraged. What is the truth of this criticism, and what is the church's responsibility toward addressing it?

A final model described by Little might also be effective in helping people overcome hindrances to church participation. The indirect communication model focuses on self-examination and encounter with "truth for me."<sup>21</sup> In this approach, art is suggested as a way of communicating which crosses boundaries. Defenses against self-expression of feelings and convictions may be broken through an encounter with stories, parables, music, film, sculpture, painting and other such media. Some retreats are currently offered for recovering people in which these media play a critical part, especially in the healing of memories and emotions.<sup>22</sup> Recovering people could be encouraged to

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<sup>21</sup> Little, 59.

<sup>22</sup> Sisters of Social Service, Holy Spirit Retreat Center, 4316 Lanai, Encino, Calif. 91436. 818-784-4515.

remember some frightening or painful encounter with a hierarchical authority or the dysfunctional behavior of a minister in their past. In a safe, supportive environment, they could then release that experience through body movement, painting, or work with clay. This author has used such biblical stories as the story of Jacob and Esau<sup>23</sup> and the parable of the Prodigal Son<sup>24</sup> to help persons realize the power of self-reliance and the pain that sometimes accompanies it.<sup>25</sup>

Belief formation, with the help of any of the above approaches, will be an ongoing ministry with recovering persons. It is a process which complements behavior and lifestyle formation. It is an extremely complex process which makes it difficult to undertake. Yet the complexity of belief formation offers many points of entry into the religious quest of recovery. "Who am I? What is life all about? Do I have Divine origins and destiny? Do I live in a system of justice and love?" are all questions asked by recovering people which may open them to ongoing education.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Exodus 32.

<sup>24</sup> Luke 15:11-24.

<sup>25</sup> Retreat based on the Twelve Steps with Moravian church youth, Crestline, Calif., January 1991.

<sup>26</sup> Kurtz, 177.

### Welcoming Bridges

When one needs to get over to a parallel highway, one looks for an overpass or bridge. The question of how recovering people might best be invited to extend their recovery into church participation is a question of what bridges to build between the recovery program and the life of the congregation. The educational bridge has been suggested and developed in this project. It must, however, be seen within an overall bridge building model of parish ministry.

The bridge is an appropriate image for extending recovery for two reasons. If the heart of recovery from dependency is the restoration of freedom of choice, the presence of bridges between the recovery program and the church gives the individual the freedom to walk over and investigate the mission and ministry of the church without making a once-for-all or an either/or choice. From the bridge, people can survey the territory of the church and discover which aspects of parish life will complement and extend the meaning and the practice of the Twelve Steps in their lives. Secondly, the image of the bridge is an image of interdependence. In order for the footings on each side of the bridge to be secure, there has to be integrity and a trustworthiness on both sides.

The question of what the bridges will look like can be answered by inquiring into the ministries of the church and



the components of the Program. Worship, education, relationships with pastors, Twelve Step meetings, prayer and meditation groups can all be bridges. Each of these ministries involve both freedom and interdependence with other people which is the orientation of Twelve Step Programs.

One of the strongest bridges would be education in an overall model of the church in the community it serves. One of the most important educational activities with recovering people would be the description and reinforcement of a model of parish ministry and leadership. The bridge metaphor suggests a certain vision of community which may be worth developing. A parish ministry model which values both intimacy and anonymity and recognizes the spiritual need for both self-reliance and dependence is inviting to consider. It is a vision which can affirm the freedom and inquiry of those who are tentative or marginal participants in the church's. The bridge model is a vision grounded in an incarnational God who is active in both church and world, inviting people out of the world to new forms of growth and discovery in the larger community.

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